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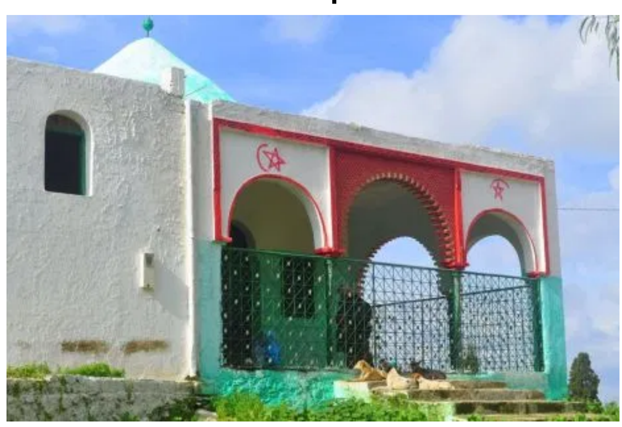
IN THE LAND OF MARABOU. "CULT OF SAINTS" IN MOROCCO

By Multi Culti Club (http://multicultclub.pl/author/aisha-kandicha/) / February 9, 2016

The cult of saints in Islam is quite an interesting social, religious ... and even political issue! The most typical modern example is Morocco, where everyone profess Islam, but each region or village has its own holy marabou. In general, Islam in Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea or Sudan is focused on human worship. Paradoxically ... because the Koran prohibits such practices. Interestingly, more often you can meet a Muslim who, leaning against the wall, makes a false oath to the Koran, than one who dares to *swear* on *qubba* (marabou's tomb) ...

Islam in Morocco is first and foremost *fakih* or law experts and *alim* or scholars. But apart from them, there are also many folk forms of this religion. The cult of saints and brotherhoods (called *tarika* , which means "the way") play a very important role in them . This spiritual version of Islam is **Sufism** (the name comes from the woolen *coat* that ascetics used to wear - *suf* means wool). The esoteric dimension of Sufism goes back to the Koran itself. *Tarika* and Sharia complement each other. Some Sufis present Islam as a nut whose shell is like Sharia, and the pulp is like a *tarika*. Walnut without shell could not grow, and walnut without flesh would not be of any use. Similarly, sharia without *tariki* would be like a body without soul, while *tariki* without sharia would not survive in the world.

Where did the worship of the saints in Morocco come from?



Marabou in the Moroccan village of Banasa (Photo: Marta El Marakchi © All rights reserved)

Converting Berbers to Islam was very difficult and complicated. A number of Berber tribes changed their faith due to material benefits, but retained their old habits - proves prof. Edward Szymański in his book *Traditions and legends of the peoples of North Africa* . The Berber population even today practices their original beliefs. Saints and ascetics spoke more to the imagination of simple people than to convoluted, imaginary and abstract theological ideas. In Islam, as well as in other religions, the worship of saints was an excuse for the recurrence of folk beliefs.

We observe a sudden increase in the cult of saints throughout Morocco during the Almohad Empire. Believers come from all over the country to the marabou tombs, even though Islam strongly condemns such practices. Muhammad ibn Tumart - founder of the Almohad dynasty (d. 1130), anticipating the flourishing of the cult of saints, reserved for himself mediation between God and a Muslim. According to the Koran, such a power of attorney can only be given by God Himself. But Tumart says that those who will appeal to Adam, Moses and Abraham on Judgment Day will get nothing. Even Jesus himself - the prophet of Christians - will do nothing and send everyone to the prophet Muhammad ... In the second half of the 11th century, al-Ghazzali's mystical philosophy caused the development of Muslim orders and asceticism (Sufism), which in turn resulted in the creation of the caste of saints. A great role in strengthening the cult of the saints in North Africa was played by ribates - fortified strongholds for Muslim monk soldiers, also serving as monasteries, where strict rigor and Islamic principles were taught. Commanders of fortress-monasteries, possessing the weapons of the Word of God and military strength, were often considered saints themselves.

Religious brotherhoods

Brotherhood members usually come from merchants and craftsmen. They take part in ritual ceremonies, zikras or recitations, dances and songs - all in accordance with the teaching of the founder of a given *tarika* . The brotherhoods also spread outside of Morocco. **Isawijja** is one of the most recognizable brotherhoods in Morocco . This brotherhood was founded in the 16th century. Works in Meknes and Fez. Outside of Morocco, it is also known in Algeria. The brotherhood is associated by Al-Jazeul (holy husband of Marakech) with Shaziliya (a great and very common *taric* in the Islamic world). His doctrine is based on the teachings of the 15th-century mystic Sidi Muhammad Ibn Isa, who was banished by the sultan of Meknes. He and his

disciples fled to the desert. To survive, they ate everything they could get their hands on - snakes, scorpions and cacti. The tomb of the holy founder Isawijji can be seen in the mausoleum of Sidi Muhammad Ibn Isa in Meknes. The brotherhood's talisman, in memory of the wandering in the desert, is the cobra. No member of the brotherhood has the right to kill her. Cobras also often appear in their religious rituals, where participants fall into a trance, sing and dance to the rhythm of drums and even go to self-harm. Isawijji presented one of such spectacular ceremonies in his painting "Les Aissaouas" (fr. *Isawijja*) Georges Clairin. Isawijji members are also resistant to snake venom. They always wear white, because black causes fear.



Marabou in Asilah. Morocco (Photo by Marta El Marakchi © All rights reserved)

Tombs of holy men

The Muslim tradition lacks a word that could literally be translated as "holy." Instead, there are different types of "religious authority." In the mystical current of Islam, such authority is *wali* ("standing under special protection", "friend") - an ideal follower who, thanks to piety, found himself close to God. In folk beliefs, saints are worshiped mainly because of their wonderful powers (*karamat*).

Almost every city has one or several sanctuaries, erected above the grave of some mystic. Usually it is a small mausoleum covered with a white dome. Believers make pilgrimages to the graves of holy husbands (*marabou*) to obtain their blessing (*barracks*). Some of the major temples called Zawija are the seats of religious brotherhoods.

Moulay Idrys II and the creation of Fez

There are basically no saints worshiped throughout Morocco or the entire Muslim world. The cult of individual saints is local. Often these are historical figures, city founders, e.g. the founder of Fez - Mouba Idrys II, who was to begin construction by

taking in hand gold-and-silver hoes (*fas*), which he began construction work - we read in the book "Traditions and legends of the peoples of North Africa" prof. Edward Szymański. The enthusiasm with which Idrys II worked was to be spread to all people and the city was quickly built. They named them Fas (Fez) from this hoe.

However, there is another (less colorful) version of the story of the creation of Fez. According to Abu Bakr Ahmad bin Muhammad ar-Razi, Idris son of Abdallah (Idris I) came to Maghreb in 172 hidri in Ramadan, fleeing the pursuit of Abu Jaffar. He was to stay in the town of Walila nad Wadi Zajtun. Many Berber tribes gathered around him and chose him as their leader. He built his city on marshes covered with thickets. A hoe (*fas*) was found during excavations for the foundations . And hence the current name of the city.

The Moulay Idris Mosque in Fez is today a haven for criminals. The fugitive who took refuge in the Idris mosque can return safely to the city, if he supplies himself with glejt - a holy raincoat acquired from the imam of the mosque. The authorities reportedly respect this asylum, but there have been cases of violation by the sultans.

Saint Sidi Abd er-Rahman and his solitude on the island



Sidi Abd er-Rahman Monastery (Photo by Marta El Marakchi © All rights reserved)

In the area of Casablanca itself there are over 30 graves of such holy men (marabou). At the west end of Boulevard de l'Océan Atlantique there is a very important place for Muslims - a rocky island near the ocean shore with the monastery of Sidi Abd er-Rahman. Among the white, stone buildings visible from afar is the tomb of a Muslim saint, famous for its supernatural powers ...

The legend says that the very pious Sidi Abd er-Rahman from Baghdad decided to separate from the worldly world. He wanted to devote himself more to matters related to God. When he could not concentrate on prayer, he sat on the shore of the ocean and played the flute beautifully to the Lord. His pious life aroused the interest of those around him, and stories of his wisdom reached the most distant ends of the Earth. One day another saint, Sidi Bouchaib ar-Radad, was near Casablanca, who

took the opportunity to visit a well-known inhabitant of the coastal rocks. They prayed together for seven days. On the 8th day the newcomer spread his plaid on the water, and the wind from the ocean allowed him to sail away. Sidi Abd er-Rahman did not immediately notice that he was alone. When he knew it, he became terrified and started searching for his guest. Suddenly the waves in front of him parted and he saw the island. From afar he heard Sidi Bouchaib's weakening and tears voice: "Sidi Abd er-Rahman, forget everything I taught you! Take your flute and play, because your blessing from God is greater than mine! " And Sidi Abd er-Rahman remained on an island off the coast of Casablanca, playing the flute to the Lord for the rest of his days.

The pious Sidi Abd er-Rahman was recognized as the patron of epileptics and mentally retarded. Moroccans (often with whole families) visit the tomb of the saint, counting on healing in hopeless cases (including infertility). They bring their sick clients here, pray, make offerings and count on ... a miracle! The saint's mausoleum also attracts people who have been cast on. The island is only available at low tide and only for the faithful. The saint's mausoleum also attracts people who have been cast on. They believe that their fate will be changed by a witch who lives nearby, who in a tiny room bodes from the lead and blood of a black rooster. Behind the mausoleum there is another place where "possessed" are brought. They bring victims with them.After killing a sheep or black goat, patients are confined to a chamber in which they are rinsed with seven ocean waves. After such purification, they are sprinkled with a mixture of 333 herbs, and their clothes are thrown into the ocean so that the evil powers flow away with them.

Seven saints from Marrakech (http://multiculticlub.pl/marrakech-sladami-siedmiu-swietych/)

The seven saints from Marrakech are so-called *awliya* (a rabbi word that refers to people to whom God gave a special rank among Muslims and blessed them). Although Marrakech is home to over 200 *awliya* graves ... it has been famous for centuries for the worship of seven holy men and their sanctuaries.



(http://multiculticlub.pl/marrakech-sladami-siedmiu-swietych/marrakechsidisouheili/)

Tomb of Sidi Abderrahman al-Suhayli in Marrakech (Photo CC: Bertramz via Wiki Commons)

In the 18th century, Sultan Moulay Ismail commissioned his minister Allam Abu Ali al-Hassan al-Yusi to designate a new pilgrimage route for the faithful. All seven graves of outstanding saint men were found and they were moved to Marrakech. This was not only to attract pilgrims to the city, but also to compete with anti-Islamic ceremonies in honor of the city's patrons and to strengthen the city's position on the international arena. The Sultan also wanted to reduce the impact of the other seven saints from Regraga near Suwajra. Mausoleums of saints are scattered around the medina of Marrakech, where these saints are buried. Every merchant arriving in the city had to pray first in all seven places dedicated to the patrons of the city (in *wraps*) before he got involved. A new weekly order was established, containing instructions as to the order of pilgrimage between individual *calls* (one saint in one day), and thus the hierarchy of patrons' importance. The week had to start with visiting the tomb of Sidi al-Qadia Iyad. Then you could go to the next *wraps* . Usystematyzujmy ...

I. Sidi al-Qadi Iyad ibn Musa (d. 1129) - a great scholar was born in 1083 in Ceuta. He was the great imam of this city and later a high judge in Granada. J ego *Wrap* visit on Sundays (the first day of the week). Buried near Bab Aïlen .

II. Sidi Jusuf Ibn Ali (d. 1178) - his full name is Abou Yaacoub Ben Ali Assenhaji. He was born in Marrakech and did not leave him all his life. He was also called "caveman". In his youth he was affected by leprosy and lost a lot of skin. People were running away from him for fear of becoming infected. His family also renounced him for fear of his cruel illness. Ibn Ali lived in a cave near Marrakech. The

locals expected his death soon, but seeing him overcome his illness, they began to visit his cave to beg for tips and solutions to their own problems. Ibn Ali was protected near Bab Aghmat, near the cave. His *Wrap* visit on Mondays.



(http://multiculticlub.pl/marrakech-sladami-siedmiu-swietych/marrakechqadiayyad-2/)

Tomb of Sidi al-Qadi Iyad ibn Musa in Marrakech (Photo CC: Bertramz via Wiki Commons)

III. Sidi Abd al-Aziz (died 1508) - 15th-century theologian. He was born in Marrakech. In his youth he was illiterate, but later he made his name and became the spiritual successor of el Jazoulego. He was buried in Marrakech. It is a local tradition that his grave is visited by women to ask for healing of their fertility and easy delivery. His *Wrap* visit on Tuesdays.

IV. Sidi Abdellah al-Ghazwani (d. 1520) - he was born and raised in Fez. Moroccan Sufi, which *wraps the* visit on Wednesday. P Italians near the Mouassine mosque.

V. Sidi Abderrahman al-Suhayli (d. 1185) - he was born in 1114 in Malaga. He was a blind man. He grew up in a poor but religious and well-educated family. His father taught him Arabic and helped him learn the Koran by heart. Al-Suhayli died in 1185 in Marrakech and was buried in Bab er Robb, at the southern gate of the city (at the very end of the cemetery). His *Wrap* visit on Thursdays.

VI. Sidi Muhammad Ibn Sulaiman al-Jazuli (d. 1454) - a mystic to whom the faithful owe Moroccan Sufism. Author of the famous collection of prayers *Dala'il al-Khayrat* . He proclaimed the necessity of a holy war with the Portuguese. In the fifteenth century, he gained so many supporters and became so influential that it worried the sultan himself. He had supposedly supernatural powers. Zawija al-Jazuli is located in the northwestern part of the medina and should be visited on Fridays.

VII. Sidi Bu-l-Abbas (d. 1205) - he devoted his whole life to the ministry and the care of the weak, the poor and the blind. He was supposed to do miracles and restore blind eyes. The beautiful *wrapper,* which is the resting place of this saint, is located at the Al-Khemis gate and should be visited on Thursdays. Its buildings include a mosque (usually surrounded by a wreath of blind beggars), a hammam, a shelter for the blind, a slaughterhouse, a small market, a cemetery (a gift from the Sadyc Sultan Abu Faris, who in this way wanted to beg for the grace of healing from epilepsy) and the dome (added for the time of Moulay Ismail). Non-Muslims can only see the courtyard. They have no access to the interior of the temple or to the *medrasa* .

To this day, many Moroccans make pilgrimages to seven Marrakesh saints. That is why many of them, when going to this city, will say that they are going to seven saints.

Mausima . Annual pilgrimages

The cult of saints in Morocco is manifested by visiting and prayers (*ziaras*) in the sanctuaries of scholars. Such a pilgrimage is often associated with some interest - recovery, offspring, etc. Usually, the pilgrim undertakes in exchange for fulfilling his request to make a sacrifice. The saint's favor can be won not only by pilgrimage or material sacrifice, but also by giving his name to his child, burial of the deceased from the family near the place of worship of the saint. Once a year, some pilgrimages take the form of large gatherings (*mausimas)* , which are also an opportunity for games, traditional exhibitions and trade fairs:

- In March, ***Mausim Mouba*** **Isy Ibn Idris** takes place in Ait Attab (in the region of Bani Mallal).
- ***Mausim Regraga*** takes place in April (40 days). The pilgrimage to celebrate Regraga - descendants of seven holy men from Berber history, takes place in 44 stages and runs through As-Suwajra and Asafi.
- ***Mausim*** **Moulay Abd Allah Ibn Ibrahim** takes place in Wazzan in May . He came to the city in 1727 and made him a religious center.
- Also in May, it takes place in Tantan ***Mausim*** **Sidi Muhammad al-Ma Ajnina** . It is a commercial and religious festival organized in honor of the founder of the city of Samara, a great hero of the French resistance. During the *mausimu, the* famous *guedra* dance is *performed* (dance from the Kulmim region, performed only by women).
- ***Mausim*** **Sidi al-Ghazi** takes place in Kulmim on the last Wednesday in June . The Sahrawi participate in the great camel market, culinary events and, competitions and *fantasia take place* . In the same month falls colorful ***Mausim*** **Moulay Bu Salhama** .
- In July in Jabal al-Alam (Rif) one of the most famous *mausias* in Morocco *takes place* . The pilgrims' goal is the grave of **Moulay Abd al-Salam Ibn Mszisz** , a Sufi mystic who died in 1228.



- In the first week of August, ***Mausim*** **Moulay Abd Allah Amghar** falls out in El Jadida , with famous fantasies. In the same month it takes place in the Wadi Warika valley to the south-east. from Marrakech ***Mausim*** **Satti Fatima** , in Rabat ***Mausim*** **Dar Zhiroun** , east of the Tiznit ***Mausim*** **Sidi Ahmada or Sidi Musa** with acrobatic shows, in Ouarzazate ***Mausim*** **Sidi Dauda** , in Safru ***Mausim*** **Sidi Lahcen Ibn Ahmada** , the holy patron of the city who lived in the 18th century. The month ***ends*** with ***Mausim*** **Sidi Jahji Ibn Janus** in Oujda, a religious holiday in honor of John the Baptist, patron of the city worshiped by Jews, Christians and Muslims.
- In September ***Mausim*** **Moulay Idris Zarhun** , founder of the first dynasty takes place . The holiday is combined with a pilgrimage to his grave. In the first week of September, ***Mausim*** **Moulay Idris II** is held in Fez , with processions of guilds of craftsmen and members of the brotherhoods to the mausoleum of the city's founder. Also in September is ***Mausim*** **Sidi Ala al-Hajj** in the hills around Chefchaouen, ***Mausim*** **Sidi Ahmad Ibn Mansura** in Moulay Bu Salham and ***Mausim*** **Dar Zira** in Tangier.
- In November, Tamakrut gathers crowds of faithful ***Mausim*** **Muhammada Bu Nasri** , with celebrations in honor of the great saint.

Most *mausimas* fall at the time of harvest and Id al-Maulid - the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. Due to the fact that Id al-Maulid is a movable feast, the dates of these *mausim also* vary from year to year. The most important are ***mausimy*** **:** **Moulay Ibrahim** near Marrakech room, **Moulay Abd as-Salam Ibn Mszisza** the north, **Sidi Muhammad Ibn Isa** in Meknes (the tomb of a holy man, the founder *Tariq* Isawijja), **Sidi Ali Ibn Hamdusza, Moulay Abd al-Kadir Dżalilego and the Feast of Candles** in the room.

Can one speak of worship of saints in Islam?

Before the arrival of the Arabs, the Berber religion was based on the worship of selected animals, celestial bodies, trees, mountains and stones. They took advantage of the advice of the oracles, and took over religious prostitution from the Phoenicians. Today, the Berber religion is Islam, mixed with the remains of ancient cults (so-called marabutism). Popular among the Berber tribes, the cult of Muslim

saints, in its form is very similar to the original worship of ancestors. Professor Edward Szymański in his book *Traditions and legends of the peoples of North Africa*proves that the worship of the saints in Islam is a departure from faith and a paradox of Islam itself. He explains this with a concession to Islamist resistant Berber tribes and combines not so much with primitive folk religiosity but also with Sufism. I do not completely deny him the rightness, but this perspective seems far too narrow to me.

Although many serious scientific sources talk about the cult of saints in Islam and connect it with Sufism, it is rather due to ignorance of Sufism and analyzing it from a Western perspective, which should not take place, because a Christian saint is not the same saint we are dealing with in Sufism. Christian saints are God's advocates, intermediaries between God and man, whom we can ask for intercession. This perception of the saint is contrary to Islamic teaching and is in his view idolatry. That is why there are no images of saints in mosques and Muslim homes. Similarly, making a picture of the Prophet Muhammad is strictly prohibited by Islam. And all this out of concern to prevent human worship. That is why the cult of saints in Morocco itself takes place without the images of saints. There are no holy pictures, figurines, medals ... From a Sufi perspective, this is something completely different - a change in the matter of the body so as to "unblock" it for the spirit. Saint energetically transforms matter around him ... during his lifetime, but also after his death. Hence, being at his grave, one can experience energetic healing. There are many accounts on the Internet of people who, while being near a marabou, have experienced something like a "transformation", "mystical experience", "refreshment" or "strange arousal." I think OSHO explains it best in his book but also after his death. Hence, being at his grave, one can experience energetic healing. There are many accounts on the Internet of people who, while being near a marabou, have experienced something like a "transformation", "mystical experience", "refreshment" or "strange arousal." I think OSHO explains it best in his book but also after his death. Hence, being at his grave, one can experience energetic healing. There are many accounts on the Internet of people who, while being near a marabou, have experienced something like a "transformation", "mystical experience", "refreshment" or "strange arousal." I think OSHO explains it best in his book*The wisdom of the sands. Comments on Sufi parables:*

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> *However, as you approach the Sufi master, his body begins to change you. The very matter of the master begins to change your matter. His matter becomes contagious. Your soul will change later, it can't happen at first. Everything must move from outside to inside. First you need to change the temple, then God ...*
>
> *Deep attachment to the body is natural ... It is no accident that the bodies of many masters have been preserved for centuries. 99 of them have been preserved in Tibet. Enlightenment changes the matter and body in which it happened. The body vibrates in a new rhythm. When you are nearby, its vibrations penetrate you. Touching the master's body is strengthening his body. That's why Jesus says, "Eat me, drink me." The master must be eaten, drunk, digested so that he penetrates into the deepest matter of your existence. The body is the beginning, the beginning must change. Only the changed body will know the changed existence. Only in this other rhythm of the body will you know God - will the gestalt change.*
>
> *Students' attachment to the body is natural. The master's body is worshiped even after his departure. In the mosque in Srinagar is Mohammed's hair - one hair! He has an amazing effect on those who know how to be in his presence. This hair retained the vibration of Muhammad, it still vibrates in the same way. Contains the subtlest message. This hair contains the true Quran.*

That is why it is so important in Sufism to have your master and to be in his presence. It is not only about learning, because it can be derived from books and various recordings. The idea is to be strengthened by the existence of the master, his matter, which has changed with him.

In this context, "cult of saints" in Sufism no longer appears as a cult, at least not in the way Christianity sees it. Of course, it cannot be excluded that a certain percentage of Muslim pilgrims to marabou are influenced by popular folk religiosity and do not understand the essence of their pilgrimage. He may even cultivate saints like a Christian. However, this does not change the form of things that the true meaning of these pilgrimages according to Sufism is completely different, regardless of the degree of religious awareness and theological knowledge of the pilgrim.

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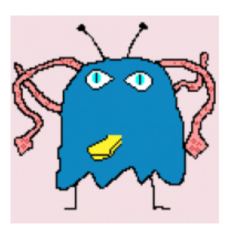
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Professionally - a PhD in religion and a journalist overwhelmed by nationwide media (which sometimes allows her to combine her passion for writing, photographing and traveling with work). She started her adventure with the media from "Super Express", then as the editor of the "Health and Science" section in "Fact" and ending at Agora's websites. Founder of the MultiCultiClub.pl cultural studies portal.

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